

The New York Times

Carmine Persico, Colombo Crime Family Boss, Is Dead at 85

By Selwyn Raab

March 8, 2019

Carmine J. Persico, who emerged from gangland Brooklyn to become the unpredictable boss of one of the nation's most powerful Mafia organizations in an era when the mob in New York was at the peak of its prosperity, died a prisoner on Thursday in North Carolina, where he was serving a 139-year sentence. He was 85.

His lawyer, Benson Weintraub, confirmed the death, at Duke University Medical Center in Durham. He said he did not know the cause. Mr. Persico had been incarcerated nearby at a federal prison in Butner, N.C.

Mr. Persico spent most of his adult life under indictment or in prison, and yet, even from behind bars, he managed to retain his status as the leader of a vast and violent criminal enterprise known as the Colombo family. Law-enforcement authorities believe that he had a strong hand in the assassinations of the mob bosses Albert Anastasia and Joey Gallo.

The son of a middle-class law firm stenographer, he began his criminal career as a teenage enforcer and hit man in South Brooklyn. His first arrest, at age 17, was for murder. But employing a keen intelligence, street-bred guile, an appetite for violence and a willingness to betray others, he quickly climbed the ladder to the top of the Colombo organization.

“He was the most fascinating figure I encountered in the world of organized crime,” said Edward A. McDonald, a former federal prosecutor who was in charge of a Justice Department unit that investigated the Mafia in the 1970s and '80s. “Because of his reputation for intelligence and toughness, he was a legend by the age of 17, and later as a mob boss he became a folk hero in certain areas of Brooklyn.”

Mr. Persico's penchant for double-crossing his mob allies earned him an underworld nickname that he detested, the Snake. It was a name that none of his confederates dared utter in his presence; they always addressed him by the more pleasant sounding but misleading appellation “Junior.”

Law-enforcement officials maintain that even when he was serving prison terms from the 1960s into the late '90s, he remained a potent force in two bloody mob wars and in the running of the Colombo family's network of criminal operations. During his tenure, his gang reaped millions of dollars a year in illegal payoffs from labor racketeering, gambling, loan-sharking and drug trafficking, mainly in the New York region.

Detectives, lawyers and underworld associates described Mr. Persico as a moody man who could be alternately charming and vicious. Lawyers remembered his ability to grasp complicated criminal law procedures and make acute strategy suggestions at his trials. In tranquil moments he delighted in

tending to his garden and in preparing his favorite dish — pasta with a delicate mixture of olive oil and garlic — for friends and relatives.

But Mafia defectors and investigators, who listened to his conversations on electronic bugs and telephone taps, said he would become enraged over the slightest suspicion that other mobsters were cheating him. An informer who shared a prison cell with him testified that he had tried to hatch plots to murder prosecutors, including Rudolph W. Giuliani, and F.B.I. agents, all of whom he held responsible for his long prison sentences.

Mob turncoats said Mr. Persico had boasted that he had a hand in more than 20 murders, either as the actual killer or in ordering the slayings. He was once stopped from garroting Larry Gallo, an old underworld confederate turned foe, when a police officer happened to walk into a bar and found Mr. Gallo, unconscious, with a rope twisted around his neck.

Mean Streets and 59 Acres

At the height of his power, from the early 1960s to the mid-'80s, Mr. Persico, neatly attired in a suit and tie, roamed Brooklyn, particularly the Carroll Gardens, Red Hook, Park Slope and Bensonhurst sections. Slightly built at 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighing about 150 pounds, he was usually accompanied by his favorite sidekick and bodyguard, Hugh McIntosh, a 6-foot-4 mobster with a frame like a tree trunk.

When he was not in Brooklyn, Mr. Persico could usually be found on the Blue Mountain Manor Horse Farm, his 59-acre spread with a nine-bedroom house in Saugerties, N.Y., about 100 miles north of New York City. A police raid at the farm in 1972 uncovered a stockpile of about 50 rifles and shotguns and 40 bombs.



Mr. Persico, left, in 1970, with his bodyguard Hugh (Apples) McIntosh in a surveillance photograph provided by the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor.

The extent of Mr. Persico's influence and authority in the Mafia was exposed at a watershed federal trial in 1986 in Manhattan. He and the reputed bosses of the Genovese and Lucchese crime families were convicted of being members of the Commission, the select body that resolved major disputes and set policies for the five New York crime families: the Bonanno, Colombo, Gambino, Genovese and Lucchese factions.

At the trial, Mr. Persico, a high school dropout, decided to represent himself, and he won the praises of lawyers and judges for his acumen in questioning witnesses, writing legal briefs and raising points of law.

His unorthodox trial tactics failed, however, and he was convicted, along with Anthony Corallo, the accused boss of the Lucchese family, and Anthony Salerno, a high-ranking member of the Genovese family. Each man was sentenced to 100 years in prison without the possibility of parole after being found guilty of conspiracy to commit murders, racketeering and leading a criminal enterprise, the Commission.

The trial, which was known as the Commission case, disrupted the hierarchies of three crime families and weakened the Mafia's ability to control New York's construction industry through threats, extortion and rigged contracts. The case boosted the political career of Mr. Giuliani, who was then the United States attorney in Manhattan. His role in uprooting three entrenched mob emperors brought him national attention and helped him become mayor of New York in 1994.

Carmine John Persico was born on Aug. 8, 1933, and grew up in Park Slope and Red Hook, which were then heavily Italian-American and Irish-American blue-collar neighborhoods. Gangsters of his day typically came from impoverished backgrounds, but Mr. Persico's upbringing was solidly middle class. His father, Carmine Sr., was a legal stenographer for Manhattan law firms, and his mother, Susan (Plantamura) Persico, was a strong-willed woman who tried to keep a tight rein on young Carmine; his older brother, Alphonse; his younger brother, Theodore; and a sister, Dolores.

But she was contending with a South Brooklyn of the 1940s that had become a bastion for organized crime. Neighborhood youths were attracted to the flashy, tough-talking gangsters with big bankrolls who hung out at the storefront clubs that they used as meeting places. The Persico brothers were no exception. Alphonse and Theodore enlisted in the Mafia's ranks at early ages, according to court records.

Carmine dropped out of high school at 16 and became known to the police as the leader of the Garfield Boys, a street gang that brandished knives, clubs and zip guns — primitive single-round weapons often secretly constructed in high school shops — in battles with rival gangs and in extorting money from teenagers.

In March 1951, when Carmine was 17, he was arrested for the fatal beating of another youth during a brawl in Prospect Park. It was his first serious encounter with the law, and when the charges against him were dropped, his reputation for boldness and cunning was enhanced.

"He was only a teenager and small in size, but people took notice of him and began to fear him," Mr. McDonald, the former prosecutor, said.

'Made' at Just 21

At 18, Mr. Persico was working for Frank (Frankie Shots) Abbatemarco, the head of a crew in a Mafia group then known as the Profaci family. Joseph Profaci was the boss, or godfather, of the organization, which evolved into the Colombo family and became one of the original five New York mob families established by the Mafia in 1931.

The Abbatemarco crew specialized in illegal sports and numbers gambling, loan-sharking, burglaries and truck cargo hijackings. According to police intelligence reports, Mr. Persico advanced swiftly as a trusted, hardened member of the crew. He was "made," or formally inducted as a soldier into the Mafia, at 21 — an unusually early age to be recognized by mob leaders.

In the mid-1950s, police intelligence reports asserted that Mr. Persico was involved in gambling and hijacking enterprises with Joseph (Crazy Joey) Gallo and his brothers Larry and Albert, all members of the Profaci family.

Mr. Persico, who ultimately would be indicted in 25 separate cases, compiled more than a dozen arrests in the 1950s and early '60s. The accusations included involvement in numbers betting, running dice games, loan-sharking, assault, burglary, attempted rape, hijacking, possession of an unregistered gun and harassing a police officer.

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WANTED

FOR
BRIBERY AND RACKETEERING



CARMINE PERSICO AKA "THE SNAKE", AKA "JUNIOR", MALE, WHITE, 5'5", 150 LBS., BROWN EYES, BLACK HAIR, 51 YEARS OF AGE, DOB 8-8-33. RESIDENCE 84-20 11 AVE., BROOKLYN, N.Y. ALT. RESIDENCE BLUE MOUNTAIN ROAD, SAUGHERTIES, N.Y. FREQUENTS SOUTH BROOKLYN AREA & STATEN ISLAND.

WANTED FOR BRIBERY AND RACKETEERING ON ARREST WARRANT ISSUED ON 10-23-84 IN THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK. SUBJECT IS THE "BOSS" OF THE COLOMBO ORGANIZED CRIME FAMILY AND IS TO BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS.

ANY INFORMATION CONTACT THE JOINT ORGANIZED CRIME TASK FORCE DET. WILLIAM VORHITTAG OR SPECIAL AGENT RICHARD UTTER AT #553-2828.

CIRCULAR NO. 84/197
DATE PREPARED 11/14

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Released from an earlier prison term in March 1984, Mr. Persico went into hiding and was placed on the F.B.I.'s 10 Most Wanted list. After being a fugitive for three months, he was arrested in February 1985.

Most of the felony charges were dropped or reduced to misdemeanors when the complainants and witnesses refused to testify or disappeared. As a result, Mr. Persico never spent more than a day or two in jail in those years; most cases ended with his paying insignificant fines.

His reputation for violent audacity increased after the murder on Oct. 25, 1957, of Albert Anastasia, the feared boss of the mob organization that was later called the Gambino family. Federal and city investigators suspected that Mr. Persico and the Gallo brothers were members of the assassination team later called "the Barbershop Quintet," so named because Mr. Anastasia was shot dead while he was being shaved in a hotel's barber shop in Midtown Manhattan.

According to underworld informers, the murder was initiated by Carlo Gambino, who was Mr. Anastasia's underboss, and sanctioned by Mr. Profaci and other Mafia bosses who feared that Mr. Anastasia was trying to become the nation's dominant mob leader. No arrests for the murder were ever made, but in a sentencing memorandum about Mr. Persico in 1986, federal prosecutors said he had admitted to a relative, "I killed Anastasia."

War

A turning point in Mr. Persico's career came in 1959, after Frank Abbatemarco, the head of his crew, was murdered. Mr. Persico and the Gallo brothers expected that Mr. Profaci would hand over Mr. Abbatemarco's illegal enterprises to them. Instead, Mr. Profaci planned to give the rackets to an older mobster. Before he could, an infuriated Mr. Persico, who was also heard to complain that Mr. Profaci had extracted too large a share of his loot, decided to act.

In retaliation, organized-crime investigators said, Mr. Persico and the Gallo brothers kidnapped six of Mr. Profaci's lieutenants and demanded a larger slice of the family's profits. Mr. Profaci agreed to the terms, and the hostages were released. But Mr. Profaci reneged on the deal after persuading Mr. Persico to rejoin him, promising him more power and money if he eliminated the Gallo brothers.

Full-fledged war erupted in 1960 between the Profaci and Gallo factions and led to 12 murders and the wounding of 15 gangsters, including Mr. Persico.

On Aug. 20, 1961, a police sergeant walked into the Sahara Club, a bar in Brooklyn, and interrupted two men in the act of strangling Larry Gallo with a rope. The attackers rushed outside and fled. Police informers reported that Mr. Persico had lured Mr. Gallo to the bar on the pretext that he intended to switch sides once again and rejoin the Gallos.

Mr. Persico was identified by police officers as one of the assailants, but Mr. Gallo refused to testify, and the assault charges were dismissed.

On May 19, 1963, Mr. Persico was driving in South Brooklyn when he became the target of gunfire from a passing truck. He was struck in his left hand and arm and never regained the full use of that hand.

The war between the Profacis and the Gallos ended in late 1963 after the death, from natural causes, of Joseph Profaci. Carlo Gambino and other Mafia leaders imposed an uneasy truce between the factions and installed Joseph A. Colombo Sr. as the boss of the old Profaci family.

Mr. Persico became enmeshed in criminal trials in the 1960s. He was indicted in Brooklyn on federal charges of being the ringleader in the 1959 hijacking of a \$50,000 cargo of linen from a truck. Four trials ended in two mistrials and the overturning of two convictions on appeal.

At a fifth trial, in 1969, Mr. Persico was again convicted. Free on bail pending an appeal in the federal courts, he was back in court in Manhattan in 1971 on a separate state indictment that accused him of being the head of a multimillion-dollar loan-sharking operation.

Mr. Persico was acquitted on the loan-sharking charges in a trial that was closed to the press and public by the presiding judge, State Supreme Court Justice George Postel. The judge ruled that newspaper articles about Mr. Persico's Mafia links could unfairly influence the jury and granted a defense motion to exclude reporters from the courtroom. Justice Postel was later admonished by an appeals court for violating news organizations' constitutional rights to report on the trial.



Mr. Persico was led into court in handcuffs in November 1980 before being convicted in New York of participating in a coalition of organized-crime families known as the Commission.

New York Post, via Associated Press

A Killing in Columbus Circle

On June 28, 1971, in a spasm of violence that shocked New York, Joseph Colombo, the boss of Mr. Persico's crime family, was shot in the head and paralyzed during an Italian-American civil-rights rally that he had organized in Columbus Circle in Manhattan. The shooting in front of thousands of spectators left Mr. Colombo unable to speak or communicate; he died in 1978. The man who shot him was himself gunned down almost immediately and died before he could be questioned.

After Mr. Colombo was incapacitated, Mr. Persico took control of the Colombo family even though his appeals on his conviction in the hijacking case had been rejected. On April 7, 1972, shortly before Mr. Persico's imprisonment began, his archrival Joey Gallo was shot down while celebrating his birthday at a late-night meal at Umberto's Clam House in Little Italy.

Mr. Gallo, like Mr. Colombo, was a flamboyant figure around New York, and his murder stunned the city. No arrests were made, but prosecutors, in their sentencing reports concerning Mr. Persico in 1986, said he had engineered Mr. Gallo's murder after concluding that Mr. Gallo had orchestrated the shooting of Mr. Colombo.

While serving his first prison sentence, Mr. Persico maintained his status as a boss, relaying his orders through relatives and trusted confederates who visited him. He was released in 1979, but in 1981 he was returned to prison for three more years for parole violations and for conspiracy to bribe an Internal Revenue Service agent for confidential information about organized-crime investigations.

Again, despite being a prison inmate hundreds of miles from New York, he continued to rule the Colombo gang, relaying vital decisions through surrogates. Released from prison in March 1984, he went into hiding after learning through a law-enforcement informant that the federal authorities intended to indict him anew for murder and racketeering.

Mr. Persico was placed on the F.B.I.'s 10 Most Wanted list, and after being a fugitive for three months, he was arrested in February 1985 at the home of a cousin in Wantagh, on Long Island. The cousin's husband, Fred DeChristopher, collected a \$50,000 reward for telling the F.B.I. where Mr. Persico was hiding out.

In June 1986, Mr. Persico was found guilty in Manhattan on charges that he was the leader of the Colombo family, which controlled union locals representing restaurant, concrete and cement workers, and that he had extorted millions of dollars from unions and construction companies in New York City.

'You Are a Tragedy'

Aaron R. Marcu, a former federal prosecutor, remembered that Mr. Persico's command of the courtroom was made evident by the frequent times that defense lawyers looked at him for approval before making decisions on such matters as scheduling sessions or whether to challenge the introduction of prosecution evidence.

"Mr. Persico, you are a tragedy," John F. Keenan, a Federal District Court judge, said in sentencing him to 39 years in prison. "You are one of the most intelligent people I have ever seen in my life."

Eight other defendants, including Mr. Persico's son Alphonse, whom prosecutors identified as a member of the top echelon of the Colombo gang, were also convicted on racketeering charges.

Three months later, Carmine Persico went on trial in Manhattan on new federal racketeering charges that he was a prominent member of the Commission, the Mafia's version of an underworld board of directors. This time he decided to be his own defense lawyer.

Lawyers and prosecutors speculated that Mr. Persico's strategy was to charm the jury. The prosecution's case hinged on tapes, surveillance and the testimony of self-described "made" Mafia soldiers and associates. In his opening and closing statements and in his cross-examining of witnesses, Mr. Persico

questioned the validity of the government's evidence without having to testify himself, which would have subjected him to cross-examination.

Instead of appearing as an eloquent lawyer, Mr. Persico sounded more like an ordinary man appealing for sympathy. His performance was Runyonesque as he tried to make legal points in a Brooklyn accent, using phrases like "I sez" and "you seen" and "dem kids."



Mr. Persico in 1986 at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan. His penchant for double-crossing his mob allies earned him his underworld nickname, the Snake. Yvonne Hemsey/Getty Images

Unswayed by Mr. Persico's tactics, the jury found him guilty along with the two other mob bosses. He was sentenced to 100 years in prison, raising his combined sentences for the Commission and Colombo family convictions to 139 years.

In 1998, Michael Lloyd, a convicted bank robber who was a government informer, testified that Mr. Persico had told him while they were together in prison that he had authorized "contracts" to kill two F.B.I. agents as well as Mr. Giuliani and Mr. Marcu, blaming them for his prison terms. Mr. Lloyd's statement was made at a parole hearing in which prosecutors confirmed that he had been an undercover informer in the late 1980s and early '90s.

Federal law-enforcement officials said they had decided not to bring murder conspiracy charges against Mr. Persico because he was already serving a life term; they had also wanted to protect Mr. Lloyd from exposure while Mr. Persico unwittingly provided him with valuable information about the Colombo family, the officials said.

Clinging to Power

Although the two convictions left Mr. Persico with no hope of release, he refused to step down as the Colombo boss. Under Mafia tradition, a boss can be removed only by death or abdication. Organized-crime experts said that Mr. Persico wanted to retain his title and power until he could hand over the leadership to his son Alphonse, known as Little Allie Boy. Alphonse Persico was imprisoned from 1986 to 1993 after his conviction in the Colombo family racketeering case.

To safeguard his son's succession, Carmine Persico appointed Victor J. Orena, a Colombo capo, or captain, as acting boss. But Mr. Persico apparently misjudged Mr. Orena's willingness to obey him.

In 1991, Mr. Orena tried to assume permanent control of the Colombo family as its new boss. Investigators said that Mr. Persico, confined at the Federal Penitentiary in Lompoc, Calif., directed his loyalists to eliminate Mr. Orena and his supporters.

Mr. Persico's decision ignited another mob war in New York, this one between the Persico and Orena partisans. Before the guns were lowered in 1993, at least 10 gangsters and a bystander had been killed. The war led to a spate of defections by Colombo soldiers and associates and to the convictions of a dozen Colombo gangsters, among them Mr. Orena. He was convicted in 1992 of murder and racketeering and sentenced to life in prison.

An armistice was arranged in the mid-'90s with a Persico loyalist, Joseph (Jo-Jo) Russo, who was also Mr. Persico's cousin, installed as acting boss. But by that time the Colombo crime family was considerably weaker. Its ranks of active soldiers and capos had been thinned by convictions and defections, and the organization was damaged by the ability of the government to blunt its gambling and loan-sharking operations and loosen its hold on construction and restaurant workers' unions.

There was satisfaction among law-enforcement officials at the fact that the Snake's gang had been further enfeebled by the willingness of members and associates to inform on their comrades.

Mr. Persico's son Alphonse pleaded guilty in 2000 to gun possession charges in Florida and was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison. He was convicted in 2009 of engineering a murder and is currently serving a sentence of life without parole.

In addition to Alphonse, Mr. Persico and his wife, Joyce (Smoldone) Persico, had two other sons, Michael and Lawrence, and a daughter, Barbara Persico Piazza. His lawyer, Mr. Weintraub, said Mr. Persico was survived by his wife, two children and 15 grandchildren. He would not identify the children. Mr. Persico's brother Alphonse died of cancer in 1989 while serving a prison term.

At his last trial in the Commission case, Mr. Persico tried to explain his life and principles in a summation to the jury. Acknowledging that he had served time in prison and that he had gone into hiding to evade a trial, he said, "Maybe I was tired of going back and forth to jail, tired of being pulled into courtrooms and tried on my name and reputation."

Insisting that he had been persecuted and unjustly prosecuted as a Mafia kingpin, he added plaintively, "When does it end, when does it stop, when do they leave you alone?"

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

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